

Senate Bill Seeks to Divorce 300,000 Workers From Personnel System

By Judith Havemann
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Defense Department, reflecting what many believe is a quiet crisis in the quality of the civil service, is working with members of Congress to sever 300,000 civilian employees from federal personnel regulations.

"Like most things that need improvement, if you try to fix the whole thing, you get nothing done," said Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), cosponsor of a bill to divorce the workers from the traditional civil service pay scale, the General Schedule. "We're trying to begin the process of building some flex-

ibility" and will deal with any governmentwide problems later, he said.

Under Bingaman's fast-track bill, initially drafted in the Pentagon, up to 200 top scientists and technicians could be paid the market rate—even if it exceeded the pay of members of Congress.

Salaries for hard-to-fill jobs, such as nuclear engineering positions, could be raised by 60 percent to recruit highly qualified workers. Some employees could be given bonuses for sticking with the government.

Up to 1,000 military retirees might get to collect their retirement checks while working for the Defense Department in high-level positions, a practice now prohibited.

The Defense Department's battle to break away from the federal personnel system provides fresh evidence of what some characterize as a quiet crisis in the civil service that is leading to fragmentation of federal pay and benefits.

Plied with evidence of agencies' inability to fill jobs or to compete with private industry for top college graduates, the Office of Personnel Management has approved 65 special pay rates for 140,000 federal jobs.

The National Bureau of Standards recently received congressional approval to try a new personnel system; Veterans Administration medical personnel have long been in a special pay category; the National Institutes of Health are pressing for pay flexibility, and a bill to allow bonuses for FBI agents assigned to New York has recently been submitted to Congress.

Union leaders blame the problem squarely on the destruction of the "comparability" system under which federal workers are supposed to be given annual adjustments to keep pay "comparable" with the private sector. Full comparability has not been paid in years, and according to the latest figures, federal workers lag 23.7 percent behind the private sector.

The administration's answer to the problem is not to raise wages across the board but to press for adoption of a personnel system demonstrated at the Naval Weapons Center in remote China Lake, Calif., and in San Diego.

Under the China Lake experiment, the 18 civil service grades

were consolidated into broad "pay bands." Raises within the bands are based on performance instead of longevity. The experiment is not supposed to cost a cent more than the traditional system.

OPM has been seeking to impose the China Lake system governmentwide for two years, but its bill, the Civil Service Simplification Act, has not moved.

Recognizing that the "simplification" bill was going nowhere, OPM Director Constance Horner met with Defense Secretary Frank C. Carlucci and NASA Administrator James C. Fletcher late last year to push for implementation of the China Lake system at the Pentagon and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Staff aides to Bingaman, whose earlier bill to improve the recruitment and retention of scientists and engineers was killed on the Senate floor, asked the Pentagon for "drafting service" in producing a bill with a better chance this spring.

The Pentagon took the "simplification" bill, crossed out OPM and wrote in the secretary of defense. The special pay rates were scaled down from Bingaman's earlier bill.

The bill was adapted to the mandate of the Senate Armed Services Committee and introduced March 31 with the support of Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.). Hearings are scheduled Wednesday and Thursday; the bill is expected to be marked up in subcommittee next week.

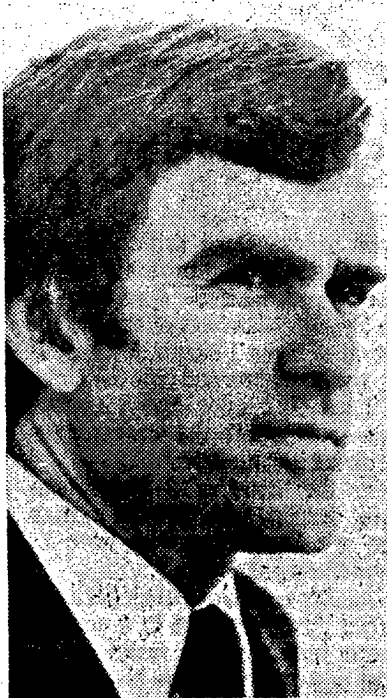
Bingaman said the purpose of his bill has been supported in the past by Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn (D-Ga.). Bingaman said he had not yet obtained the support of Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), the key Republican in the civil service area.

Sen. David H. Pryor (D-Ark.), chairman of the subcommittee on federal services, post office and civil service, has "concerns about the size of the project and its Balkanization" of the work force, according to an aide.

House civil service subcommittee Chairwoman Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.) called the bill a "full-scale attack on the merit system. More flexibility is always needed, but the Defense Department has not won an award for good management lately."

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SEN. JEFF BINGAMAN
... aim is "building some flexibility"